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Cutting: A Self-Injurious Behavior Among Adolescents



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There has been an increase in self-injurious behaviors like “cutting” in young teens and adolescents. A recent study by Cornell University found that 12-24% of young people have cut themselves, three-fourths of them injuring themselves more than once. Some speculate that this is a problem prevalent among middle and upper income individuals and more likely to be associated with females. Although male adolescents cut themselves they are more likely to engage in self-injurious behaviors that lead to self bruising. They may punch objects or other people with the intention of hurting themselves. In any event, self-injury is a problem that we need to consider as a potential threat amongst our campers. In my own psychotherapy practice I see patients who are engaged in cutting. Many of these patients attend camps that are Sobel

clients. Some of our very own campers are using razor blades, scissors, safety pins, knives and other sharp objects that can easily be found in camp to cut themselves!

Teens that cut themselves often report feeling overwhelmed with emotions that are generally negative. Sometimes they even feel emotionally numb. Cutting either temporarily releases these emotions and helps manage painful feelings or is a way to experience some sense of any feeling at all. Although it may be a maladaptive way to cope with anxiety and stress it may help individuals feel in control over their mind and body, express their feelings, distract themselves from their problems or create noticeable wounds to alert other to their pain. Some teens report cutting themselves in order to experience the rush of endorphins which creates a heightened state of arousal. There is a parallel between cutting and eating disorders which is well recognized in the camp population already. Anxiety, depression and sexual abuse are linked to cutting as well.

Cutting most often occurs on hands, wrists, stomach and thighs. The severity of the act ranges from superficial wounds to lasting scars. It is known as a “non-suicidal injury.” These teens generally do not want to die but want the emotional pain they are experiencing to go away. Cutting is best understood as a poor but temporary escape from problems.

So what are the implications for camp? How can we detect if a camper is cutting and what do we do if it is discovered?

Cutting often goes undetected. However, it is more likely to be discovered in a camp setting where campers and counselors have frequent interactions and change in the same bunk. Signs or “red flags” to look for are:

- Dress that is inappropriate to the season (e.g., consistently wearing long sleeves or pants during the day at camp).

- Consistently using wrist bands or coverings on their arms. This is difficult as campers often wear excessive bracelets throughout the camp season, many of which they make in arts and crafts.
- An unwillingness to participate in events or activities which require less body coverage (such as swimming).

Campers and counselors have easy access to implements they can use to cut. If a camper or counselor wants to cut him or herself, camp is an easy place to do it. On the other hand, it can also be a relatively easy place for this behavior to be discovered.

Counselors should be instructed to notify group leaders and directors immediately if this behavior is suspected of a camper or co-counselor. They should not approach campers or other counselors on their own or discuss their observations with others. The director or group leader should be responsible for discussing this behavior directly with the individual. Questions should be non-threatening, non-judgmental and emotionally neutral. Tactics that demonstrate “respectful curiosity” should be used. An example might be starting a conversation by saying “People have noticed that you have marks on your arm. Did you fall and hurt yourself or cut yourself doing some activity?” Gradually you can lead the discussion to more direct questioning.

The rapid spread of cutting among youth suggests that this behavior may be contagious. There is often a fad-like quality to it. There is widespread media portrayal of this behavior in movies, books and newspapers illustrating cutting as a way of coping. The Academy Award nominated film *Black Swan* portrays cutting behavior as a way the young dancer copes with her stress. Because of the potential for contagion to other campers and because it may signal other psychological issues, it is recommended that any camper or counselor who is engaging in cutting (even if it is only one time) should be sent home from camp to receive psychological counseling and medical evaluation of wounds.

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